Development, displacement and corruption in West Town

By Charles Fraga

When a neighborhood becomes gentrified, it is commonly assumed to be an almost natural process. Neighborhoods change, the common refrain, and new populations replace old ones.

Historically, this has been the case in West Town, home of 1st Ward Alderman Jesse Granato and, currently, some of the hottest real estate in Chicago. Located on the near northwest side, West Town stretches from North Avenue south to Grand Avenue and from Western Avenue east to the wooden frame houses that sit in the shadow of the JFK along Cleaver and Noble Streets.

But something more seems to be going on in West Town. Public records show that Alderman Granato performed a series of highly lucrative zoning favors for a well-connected real estate developer in the area, around the same time that the developer pumped $8,000 into Granato's campaign funds.

Both Granato and the developer, Mark R. Fisher, deny any wrongdoing. But when StreetWise asked Granato if he knew that Fisher gave him more money than any other developer in the ward, he replied: “Why wouldn’t I? You think I don’t look over my contribution list?”

Originally settled by Germans, Polish immigrants arrived in West Town around the turn of the century, forming a community clustered around Milwaukee Avenue. After the Second World War, the majority of which is luxury lofts and condominiums. Rents and property values have doubled and tripled in much of the ward over the last several years.

The rapid gentrification of the neighborhood has been unlike anything previously seen in West Town and has produced sharp divisions in the community. Of the many groups voicing their visions of the future, two groups have emerged as the most likely contenders to shape the future of the area: developers and grass-roots activists. Both are vying for the ear of Jesse Granato. So far, it seems, Granato is listening to the developers.

While neighborhood organizations like Erie Settlement House, Association House, Pueblo Sin Fronteras, and the West Town Tenants Union stage protests outside of Alderman Granato’s office for affordable housing, local control over schools, and reasonable rents, the developers stride through the door and talk business. Their cozy relationship with Granato can be ascertained from a quick perusal of Granato’s political contribution records.

In 1996, Granato received $39,100 in donations, of which $32,200 was itemized. Of the itemized donations, $12,000, over one third of the total, came from developers, construction companies and homeowner associations. But that is nothing new for Chicago politics, nor is it illegal. What does raise eyebrows is that $7,000 more
City attacked for "deplorable" assessment centers

Homeless Activists Seek Court Action Against City Human Services Department

**By Charles Frogo**

At first glance, assessment centers seem like a good idea: places where social service professionals process homeless women and their children, evaluate their needs, and place them in long-term transitional or treatment programs.

But two city-funded assessment centers have been hit with a gathering storm of allegations that the centers are dirty, overcrowded and serve food unfit to eat.

The two centers are Family Connection at 502 N. Central Ave. and People Reaching Out (PRO) center at the Spiritual Center of God, 5250 North Ave.

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) entered the fray June 2 with a press conference in Daley Center on the alleged abuses at the centers. CCH publicized its request for an injunction, filed by the CCH's legal arm, that seeks to compel the city to release records about the assessment centers' operations, funding, and management.

The injunction, which is awaiting court action, marks the culmination of a "110-day-long process," said Rene Heybach, director of CCH's law project, in which the response made it necessary for CCH to take legal action, according to Heybach.

Two mothers who spent time in the centers last month reported bad conditions there.

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Homeless activists announce they are going to trial to get the city to release information on their assessment centers

Latausha Brown, a mother of three children who spent several days at the Family Connection center, said she and center, and the whole experience left her reluctant to go back.

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I'd rather sleep in the park," she said.

Another mother, Mary Baker, whose 18-month-old son was hospitalized after their stay at the Family Center, told a similar story.

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The toilets were plugged up," said Baker. "Roaches were crawling all over. All the kids [in the center] were sick when I left."

According to Della Mitchell, lead organizer for CCH, these reports symbolize the Daley administration's misplaced priorities.

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We don't need assessment centers," Mitchell said. "We need public housing. There are millions of dollars flowing into these centers that could be going into permanent housing. There are millions of dollars being spent on trees in this city, while they tear down public housing. Yet [the Daley administration] says they care."

The city government has remained mostly silent. Department of Department of Human Services commissioner Daniel J. Alvarez told the Tribune that no complaints had reached his office. Alvarez did not return the city government's response to the CCH's request for the release of records.

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